



## E-Bulletin

# Minimum Subsistence Index

### A New Tool to Revolutionize Assistance and Reparations to Victims of Colombia's Armed Conflict



Representatives from the Victims' Unit present information about humanitarian assistance in San Alberto (Cesar) on August 28, 2013  
Source: <http://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/>

**Minimum Subsistence** refers to the minimum needs that a human must fulfill in order to survive, in terms of nutrition, housing, medical services, and sanitary conditions. Reaching a minimum subsistence level is a necessary, but not sufficient, step towards ending vulnerability.

The Colombian Victims' Law (Law 1448 of 2011), is designed to promote the displaced population's full enjoyment of constitutionally safeguarded rights and cease their condition of vulnerability. The Victims' Law, which has a validity of 10 years, is expected to provide reparations for 4 million victims of the internal armed conflict in Colombia. To accomplish this ambitious task, the Law established a new government agency, the Special Administrative Unit for Comprehensive Victims' Assistance and Reparations (Victims' Unit). Since the Victims' Unit's inception, the **USAID Public Policy Program** has provided crucial technical support to strengthen the Unit's institutional capacity to respond to the specific needs of these victims.

In what is perhaps one of the most significant accomplishments of the USAID Public Policy Program's technical assistance to the Victims' Unit over the past three years, the Government of Colombia (GOC) will soon begin to implement the **Minimum Subsistence Index (MSI)**. When fully implemented, the MSI could result in a redirection of up to 25% of the funds destined for the Victims' Unit. For example, using its 2012 annual budget of US\$440 M, this means that the Victims' Unit could designate US\$110 M towards the promotion of income-generation activities and sustainable livelihoods, as part of individual or collective reparation plans for victims. This more efficient use of public resources means that the GOC can also prevent dependence on humanitarian assistance by transforming victims' situations of suffering and vulnerability into realities characterized by long-term self-sufficiency and social inclusion.

With more than 10%<sup>1</sup> of the national population classified as internally displaced people (IDPs), the Colombian internal armed conflict has generated the largest IDP crisis in the world. By the end of August 2013, the Unit had received close to 700,000 requests for humanitarian assistance since the start of the year. In this challenging context, the USAID Public Policy Program has been assisting the GOC to prioritize its humanitarian response and target its limited resources to those most vulnerable.

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<sup>1</sup>There are 5,027,964 displaced Colombians registered in the Victims' Unit's National Information Network as of August 31, 2013. For more information, please see: [http://mi.unidadvictimas.gov.co/?page\\_id=1629](http://mi.unidadvictimas.gov.co/?page_id=1629)

In a protracted emergency situation such as Colombia's, there is a risk that victims of the war develop an overreliance on humanitarian assistance. In order to prevent dependency on aid, a crucial aspect of a robust National System for Victims' Assistance and Comprehensive Reparations (SNARIV) response is a way for the GOC to recognize when a person is no longer vulnerable. It is imperative that the GOC be able to determine when a victim reaches a minimum subsistence level, not only to ensure that limited resources are optimally distributed to those who are meant to be served by the Victims' Law, but also to guarantee that those people who have achieved the minimum subsistence level can access other types of assistance that are better suited to their specific needs.

The **USAID Public Policy Program has provided substantial technical assistance to the GOC to create the MSI: developing the concept** of Minimum Subsistence based on a rigorous legal analysis, **devising a formula** to assess a victim's level of need, **designing the software** which the GOC will use to determine a victim's level of need, and **incorporating differential ethnic and gender focuses** into the Index. This important work will ensure that the SNARIV functions effectively in a way that respects conflict victims' rights, as well as considers the State's fiscal reality.

In this way, the Program experts assisted the Victims' Unit to define a measurement model that (i) identifies the minimum subsistence needs of households victimized by displacement; (ii) classifies these shortcomings in terms of level of severity and urgency; (iii) identifies households that are experiencing a situation of extreme gravity and urgency; and (iv) defines the characteristics of humanitarian assistance to be delivered to each household.

The Victims' Unit is required to provide humanitarian assistance to address victims' situations along three key axes: food needs, housing needs and health needs. The MSI measures deficiencies in these areas by administering methodological instruments from well-reputed international tools (adapted for the Colombian context), by collecting data from previously administered national surveys, and, in some cases, by cross-checking information with visits to the victims' homes. Based on the aggregate scores yielded by these measurements, the household is classified in one of the following categories along each indicator: Critical, Mild, No Need.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to developing the concept and measurement instrument, the Program also helped the Victims' Unit prepare strategic meetings to present and validate the Minimum Subsistence concept with key stakeholders, such as the Colombian Family Welfare Institute and the Director of the Department of Social Prosperity. The concept received the full approval from all respective decision makers, and at present the Victims' Unit is engaged in public relations work to lay the foundation for the rollout of the MSI before the end of the year.

Moreover, the Program conducted a study of the technical specifications for the design of the information system that will be used to measure minimum subsistence. The USAID effort to operationalize the MSI through the Victims' Unit will continue with the support of other partners, such as the International Organization of Migration (IOM).

<sup>2</sup> With the exception of responsibility for mild food needs, which is assigned to the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF), the Victims' Unit is tasked with responding to all other critical and mild housing and food needs. The Victims' Unit coordinates with the SNARIV to provide access to the GOC's institutional offer of health services for all levels of health needs.